



MEIRA CHAND

The power and poetry of words has drawn novelist **MEIRA CHAND** (b. 1942) from an early age. Born in London to a Swiss mother and Indian father, she has a unique and culturally fragmented background compounded by an itinerant life, that has shaped her work. After living at length in Japan, then India, she relocated to Singapore in 1997 and became a Singapore citizen in 2011.



Meira with her family in Japan, circa 1980.
Photo courtesy of Meira Chand

Writing, she says, is the only way she can pin down the culturally diverse worlds around her and examine her relationship to them, and to the known and the unknown worlds we carry within us. She sees her writing as a journey into the mystery that resides at the centre of us all, and the search for meaning in our lives. Her work explores the position of the outsider, with the corresponding themes of spiritual isolation, the search for identity and belonging, and the conflict of cultures.

Meira has a PhD in creative writing from the University of Western Australia and has written nine novels and a collection of short stories. Her books are internationally acclaimed, with three longlistings for the prestigious Booker Prize. 'A Different Sky' (2010) was a Book of the Month for the UK bookstore chain, Waterstones, and on Oprah Winfrey's recommended reading list. In 1991, her novel 'House of the Sun' was adapted for the stage in London, starring Meera Sayal. It was the first all-Asian play with an all-Asian cast and was Voted Critic's Choice by Time Out. More recently, in Singapore, she wrote the story from which the successful production, 'LKY: The Musical', was developed. A regular column she wrote for The Straits Times was widely read.

Meira's life and work straddle cultures and continents. The outsider-insider view of the many worlds depicted in her books can be said to epitomise our modern life and the immigrant's search for place and acceptance. Singapore is an accidental country, founded originally largely by immigrants, and in its disparate multicultural parts, she finds a sense of inclusion she has not met before. For the first time her cultural fragmentation places her not at the edge of society, but at the centre of a greater whole, and she feels she has come home.



WRITING FROM THE MARGINS OF HISTORY TOWARDS A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

BY OLIVIA HO

Meira Chand was born during an air raid in World War II. Her earliest memories are of the wail of sirens, of running to the shelter her father had built in their London garden. “You don’t know what life is unless you’ve lived through war, when you don’t really know if you’re going to wake up the next morning,” her mother would tell her. Years later, as an author, she would return over and over again to the subject of war, to the terror that must have enveloped her mother as she, surrounded by death, brought forth new life.

The wounds of history and the stories of those on its margins feature in Meira’s nine novels, including ‘A Different Sky’ (2010), a sweeping epic of Singapore’s past. All her life, she has written from the perspective of an outsider. She was born in 1942 to a Punjabi doctor and a Swiss housewife; at school in London, she was the only non-ethnically British child. At the age of 19, she married businessman Kumar Chand, with whom she has two children, and moved to Japan, where they spent more than 30 years and which she found profoundly isolating. Even in Mumbai, where her family relocated for six years in the 1970s, she did not feel like she belonged. “It was the country of my father, but there I was called ‘English’ instead of ‘Indian’.”



Meira at five years old.
Photo courtesy of Meira Chand

In India, she began writing short stories. “It was the first time I had faced a whole part of myself that I had really never known before, and there was suddenly no way that I could understand what was happening to me except through the written word.” When they had to move back to Japan, she was bereft. “I felt that in losing India, I had lost my material.”

One day, on her return to Japan, a sentence suddenly came into her head. “It buzzed around like some angry insect and wouldn’t go away. In the end, just to get rid of it, I sat down and wrote it out. As soon as I finished, another sentence appeared.” Soon, she was writing pages about a child she did not know, a half-Japanese, half-English girl. “I had no plan. I just sat down at my desk every day and it was as if I took dictation.”

Meira sold her first novel, ‘The Gossamer Fly’ (1979), to John Murray, the historic British publisher of Jane Austen and Lord Byron. Over 22 years, she published seven novels, five of them set chiefly in Japan and two in India.

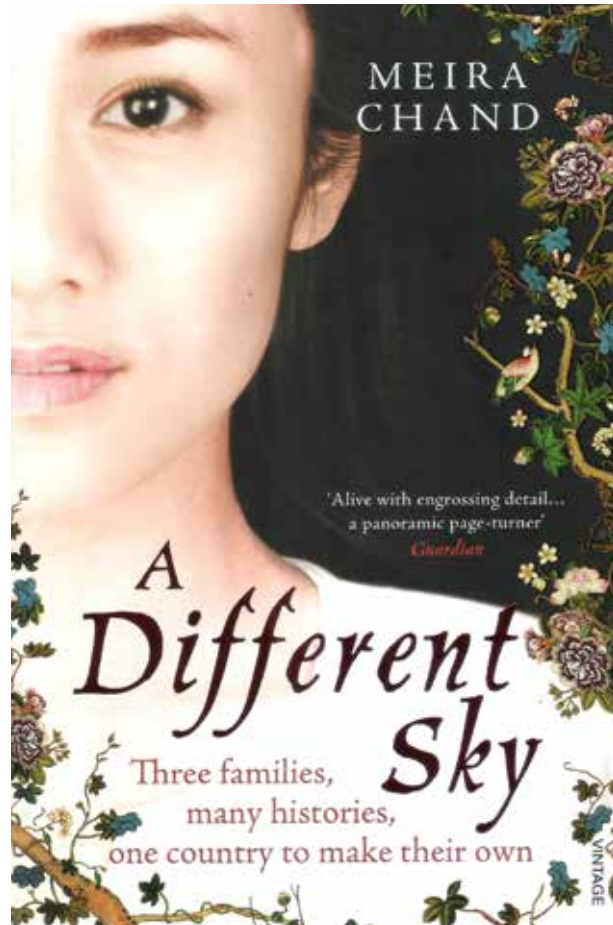
When she moved to Singapore in 1997, her reputation preceded her. At a function, she met former President S. R. Nathan, who told her that he had read ‘A Choice of Evils’ (1996), her tome about the Sino-Japanese War, and hoped she might give Singapore’s history the same epic treatment. “Of course I said yes, not realising what I had agreed to,” says Meira, who back then knew next to nothing about Singapore.

It would take her nearly eight years of painstaking research to produce ‘A Different Sky’. She read vociferously and listened to hours of oral history recordings at the National Archives of Singapore. She lacked, however, the inner memory of someone born and raised in Singapore. “I got to about 200 pages and it just wasn’t working. There was so much missing.” She stopped writing.

A few months into her dry spell, she woke up at 2am with a sentence in her head. She knew by now not to ignore these signs; she got up and wrote the sentence down. Sure enough, it was followed by another, and another. “I knew I had researched all the facts and digested them to a point that I could throw that knowledge over my shoulder, and I now had something of a local memory – nothing like a Singaporean would have, but enough for me to go forward.”

The words that had come to her at 2am would eventually form the novel’s tense opening scene in 1927, as a group of terrified passengers of different races, trapped on a trolley bus, witness a violent riot in Chinatown. From there, she traces Singapore’s turbulent journey from British colonial rule, through the Japanese Occupation of World War II, to the cusp of self-governance in 1957.

The novel has three key narrators: Howard, a Eurasian whose ambitions are curtailed by colonial bias; Mei Lan, the granddaughter of a wealthy Chinese magnate, who defies tradition and trauma to champion women’s rights; and Raj, a business-savvy immigrant from India whose knack



'A Different Sky', 2010.
Photo courtesy of Meira Chand

for playing sides helps him rise to success. All, like Meira, are outsiders in a transient country that is “nobody’s homeland,” but learn to look together towards a future that “lies under a different sky.”¹

'A Different Sky' was longlisted for the 2012 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and appeared on American celebrity mogul Oprah Winfrey's recommended reading list. In Singapore, it heralded Chand's entrance into the local canon. “It took me below the surface, and it cemented me here,” says Meira, who became a Singapore citizen in 2011.

Meira would soon undertake another historic project. In 2012, she received a request to write the synopsis for an opera about Singapore's founding premier Lee Kuan Yew. Meira was no stranger to the theatre – her novel 'House of the Sun' (1989) had been adapted for the London stage by Tamasha Theatre Company and Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1990 – but she thought the proposal preposterous. “Mr Lee, on stage, singing!” She almost dismissed it, but eventually came onboard with what would become 'The LKY Musical'.

The initial pitch had been for an opera about Mr Lee's romance with his wife, Madam Kwa Geok Choo. Meira, fresh from researching 'A Different Sky', argued that it be expanded to take in more than his student days at the University of Cambridge and cover the drama of his later life, caught up in the historic story of Singapore's independence. “They asked me to write an outline, just a page or two. I sat down to write and it came up to more than 100 pages.”

To compress the life of such a towering figure – and with it, the story of a nation's building – seemed an insurmountable task. “We were quaking at every step,” recalls Meira. “We expected any day to be told we couldn't go ahead.” A few months before the production was due to open, Mr Lee died. The production team feared the show could not go on, but despite numerous setbacks, 'The LKY Musical' opened in July 2015. Presented by Aiwei and Singapore Repertory Theatre, it had music by Dick Lee and starred Adrian Pang in a Straits Times Life Theatre Award-winning turn as Mr Lee. It ran again in 2022, the first large-scale musical to be staged in Singapore after the Covid-19 pandemic.

From the pressures of telling such a well-known story, Meira dove back into mining history for obscure voices on the margins. Her ninth novel, 'Sacred Waters' (2018), which arose from her PhD in creative writing at the University of Western Australia, highlighted the little-known Rani of Jhansi regiment, one of the few female fighting forces in World War II. Formed in 1943 by Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, it had its first training camp in Singapore. Most of its recruits were illiterate young women from Malayan rubber estates for whom enlisting represented a rare opportunity for empowerment.

Meira spent more than seven years researching 'Sacred Waters', including tracking down and interviewing four former Rani of Jhansi members.



She hopes that her novels may enlighten young women today about the restrictions and deprivations that their grandmothers endured. “Non-fiction books can give you facts, but it is only fiction that gives you emotions. I hope my readers will learn to value the kinds of freedom that women are beginning to have today. Of course, we still have a long, long way to go.”

For Meira, whose outsider status has infused and fuelled her entire writing career, the acknowledgment that comes with the Cultural Medallion has been a surprise. “I've never thought of writing as more than a tool to survive. I've lived my whole life on the periphery; all I had to make a life in the many places I've been thrown into, not by choice but by circumstances, was the written word.”

And yet Singapore was once, too, a community of outsiders. “It's been called an accidental country,” says Meira, “built by immigrants and indentured labourers – yesterday's rickshaw runners could be the great-great-grandfathers of today's multi-millionaires. I've begun to feel that this is the right place for me, because I, like Singapore, am made up of so many diverse elements. To be in a place where I've got something to give and where what I have to give is welcomed – this has become home.”

Olivia Ho is a writer and book critic from Singapore. She is pursuing a PhD in literature at University College London.



1 Meira Chand, 'A Different Sky' (London: Harvill Secker, 2010), p. 156; p. 418.

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WORDS OF APPRECIATION

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